



WHEN CARING GETS TO BE TOO MUCH

Families wind up in homeless shelters. Entire neighborhoods are destroyed by fire. Earthquakes hit impoverished countries, leaving thousands dead. The news media bring us events from nearby and from far away that show people suffering. Our gut reaction is often to wonder how we can help.

But sometimes the tragedies seem constant and overwhelming, and whatever help we can offer seems insignificant. We may feel frustrated, numb or even angry as a result. There's a term for this emotional condition: compassion fatigue.

The experience may simply be called "burn out," but that doesn't explain the seriousness of what may be happening. The impact can be greatest when close personal relationships are involved, such as when a relative serves as a caregiver to someone suffering serious emotional problems, especially those resulting from trauma. The person providing care naturally focuses on the needs of the person being helped, while ignoring the emotional impact of the care-giving experience.

"When caregivers focus on others without practicing self-care, destructive behaviors can surface," according to the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project (<http://www.compassionfatigue.org>). "Apathy, isolation, bottled up emotions and substance abuse head a long list of symptoms..."

If you or a coworker is in a care-giving role or have a job helping people through traumatic events or other problems, you may wonder about compassion fatigue. Here are some of the symptoms to look for:

- » Excessive blaming
- » Bottled up emotions
- » Isolation from others
- » Use of alcohol or drugs to mask feelings
- » Poor self-care (i.e., hygiene, appearance)
- » Recurring nightmares or flashbacks to traumatic event
- » Chronic physical ailments such as gastrointestinal problems and recurrent colds
- » Apathy, sadness, diminished pleasure doing things you used to enjoy
- » Difficulty concentrating
- » Mental and physical exhaustion

Seeking help for yourself can be difficult when you feel someone depends on you. Your EAP can be a source of support for you and provide resources to improve the care you're providing to someone. Call or go online to get assistance.

Meanwhile, here are things the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project says you can do for yourself or for others in order to cope with compassion fatigue:

- » Be kind to yourself.
- » Enhance your awareness with education.
- » Understand that those close to you may not be there when you need them most.

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- » Exchange information and feelings with people who can validate you.
- » Listen to others who are suffering.
- » Clarify your personal boundaries. Understand what helps you cope, and what doesn't.
- » Express your needs verbally.
- » Take a break from your care-giving duties. Even a short one helps recharge your batteries.

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for financial, medical, psychiatric, psychological or behavioral healthcare advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

Are you feeling overwhelmed by your duties as a caregiver? Call your EAP for help!

Your Employee Assistance Program helps solve problems, whether you face them at work or at home. We can address many issues, including:

- » Family relationships
- » Emotional health
- » Eldercare
- » Fitness and nutrition

Call *any time* for a telephonic consultation.

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